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The Unendorsable Frank Zappa

Paul Carr, ed., Frank Zappa and the And, Farnham (Surrey), Ashgate, 2013

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REFERENCES

CARR, Paul, ed., *Frank Zappa and the And*, Farnham (Surrey), Ashgate, 2013, 247 pages, ISBN 978-4094-3337-8, 49.50 pounds.

1 The title seems cryptic at first, and the thanks extended to "Jesus Christ—the author of all things good" in the acknowledgments section somewhat puzzling. This collection of essays gathered by Paul Carr offers a comprehensive view of Frank Zappa the artist, the public figure and the man. A prolific performer, composer, producer, recording engineer, social commentator and occasional film director, Frank Zappa never achieved the level of popularity of the major American bands that emerged in the mid-to-late sixties. If he was part of the global picture of rock music, it was mostly in the background or on the sidelines: as the editor admits in his illuminating introduction, "his music is unlikely ever to enter the mainstream of popular music" (14). Frank Zappa's legacy, however, has endured, and many of his records are still available, not to mention the almost innumerable videos on *YouTube* and similar Internet sites. Having died relatively young from prostate cancer, Frank Zappa (1940-1993) has been a goldmine for fans and academics alike, and he has inspired a sizeable bibliography in English and many other languages.

2 The carefully edited (complete with bibliography and index) and multifaceted contributions in this volume cover almost every aspect of Zappa's talent. Opening the series with a study on " Zappa and Horror," Richard Hand presents and analyzes Zappa's gothic connections, "the place of horror" being an "essential element to his oeuvre, employed for the purposes of communal celebration, socio-political satire, or outright unbridled laughter" (32). Zappa's memorable Halloween concerts in New York in the

1970s expressed this "saturnalian function" quite efficiently (18), drawing on a motley heritage of B-movies that many late-late-show aficionados in the audience shared and could identify with. In another stimulating introductory piece, "Zappa and Religion," Kevin Seal assesses the musician's spiritual dimensions. Everyone knows that Zappa was no friend of religion. He did come from a Catholic background—his father taught history at a Jesuit college, and "he considered entering the priesthood" (50) as a teenager—but he became aware of the strictures of religion in American society, and soon developed a skeptical, if not downright hostile attitude to Christianity—especially of the fundamentalist kind. Seal shows that Zappa's cumulative comments on things religious in his recordings—alternatively Catholicism, Evangelism and Eastern religions—project a somewhat different picture. They confirm an aversion to established or conventional metaphysics, but they also reveal a deference to science. Zappa had come to believe that "everything in the universe is a vibration of a note"—which may lead to the tentative conclusion that while there is no single creator, there may very well be a "unifying force and energy": music. When confronted with the question "what is your religion?", Zappa would answer: "Musician"... (65)

3 Manuel de la Fuente, in his exploration of Zappa's cultural legacy as movie-maker contends that the movies "are not a secondary aspect of his oeuvre," as they possibly "establish a reaction and opposition against the social and political forces that are willing to control dissidence" (47). Speaking of which, Claude Chastagner sets out to capture the very essence of Zappa's "Resistance." This he does by examining a handful of songs or performances, such as "Do You Like My New Car/Happy Together" (1970s), or "Valley Girl" (1982). While these examples show that "Zappa's overarching strategy seems to be humor" (110), what really characterizes his brand of resistance is his deliberate choice of positioning himself at a crossroads, a place Chastagner defines as the "interstice between pleasure and commitment, comedy and satire" (113). Thus it becomes possible to spell out Zappa's politics: "I do not need you to endorse, nor imitate what I do; I will even do my best not to be endorsable; but start working on your own space too." (114).

4 In diverse ways, the book unfolds and illustrates Zappa's "Conceptual Continuity"—the semi-ironic "notion" developed by the artist himself. If we close our eyes and try to remember Zappa, what usually comes up are images of a lean, sharp-faced, dark-haired and goateed man holding forth on the stage in a curious short-sleeved orange-colored jumpsuit. Geoffrey Wills' study "Zappa and the Story-Song: A Rage of Cultural Influences" explains Zappa from the point of view of his immersion in American popular culture in a broader sense. Strangely enough, it is not so much the singer or the guitarist whom we hear, but rather the distinctive baritone, "with his deadpan, sarcastic, surreal delivery" (120). Now this perceived persona is connected: it conjures up other images from the huge reservoir of popular figures like Groucho Marx, or even Orson Welles, another major example of a "laconic, insinuating baritone"... What Geoffrey Will explores more attentively, however, is the company of comedians, stand-up or otherwise, that emerged in the 1950s, a group which would include Lord Buckley, Lenny Bruce, Victor Borge, Tom Lehrer, Shelley Berman, Ernie Kovacs and Ken Nordine. There are many connections here, but it is perhaps Ken Nordine who deserves a special notice, as an early critic of the effects of mass culture, one of his routines in particular, "The Vidiot," having inspired Zappa's "I'm in the Slime" (121). Another major source of inspiration were Stan Freberg and his parodies of major hits like the "Great Pretender" or "Heartbreak hotel." Zappa, though not much of a reader himself, in the traditional, literary sense at least, was

definitely an American storyteller. His kind of storytelling, as Nick Awde makes clear in his essay "Zappa and Satire," departs radically from the safety of the "saccharine gagsmithery (e.g. Bob Hope)" (88) of humor for the masses, compatible with commercial television, family matinees or US-army-sponsored entertainment. Throughout his career, Zappa constantly adapted his humor "to maintain its relevance," gradually moving away from the initial phase of conceptual comedy, to social comment, to the politics of perversion, when his satire became more both more virulent and more focused, culminating perhaps in the famous Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) hearings in Congress in 1985, when he testified vigorously against censorship in music.

5 Further contributions analyze and evaluate Zappa's aesthetic techniques and significance. James Gardner, in his provocatively entitled piece ("Zappa and The Razor") embarks on a minute analysis of sampling methods, trying to define how Zappa organizes sound while ostensibly disorganizing it. Martin Knakkergaard, examining the collage composition "Brown Shoes Don't Make It" (Mothers of Inventions, *Absolutely Free*, 1967), undertakes to demonstrate that Zappa's work is "a highly coherent and stringently complex work of meaning" (168), in this particular case "a theatrical form not far removed from Brechtian epic theater, in its use of *Verfremdung*" (183), all of which point to the modernism, i.e., the originality of Zappa's aesthetic choices. Michel Delville, in his piece entitled "Zappa and the Avant-Garde: Artifice/Absorption/Expression" argues that placing him "in the camp of postmodern eclecticism" is all the more tempting as Zappa "cannot be credited with having developed a unique personal style." But to understand and appreciate his importance fully, one has to measure his considerable force as a satirist and a resister—to "depthless and neutral models of expressivity." This, for Delville, becomes especially "striking in his guitar solos, whose voices are immediately recognizable." With all the non musical, non artistic material present in Zappa's work, his special brand of resistance to the neutral brings him "closer to baroque and grotesque modes of representations," Zappa's own version, then, of "the avant-garde" (198-99).

6 There is a discreet undercurrent in the collection, which becomes quite manifest in David Sanjek's article "Zappa and the Freaks: Recording Wild Man Fisher"; it is something which has to do with the humanity of Frank Zappa, in this case apparent in the way he related to Larry "Wild Man" Fischer, a "paranoid, schizophrenic, manic depressive street performer" born in Los Angeles in 1945 (151). There is something quite moving in Zappa's fascination with Larry Fischer, in his insistence on accepting him on his (Larry Fischer's) own terms giving him his due, no matter what the cost was. Paula Hearsum, in the appropriately final article, offers an interesting discussion of "Zappa and mortality: the Mediation of Zappa's Death," concentrating on the genre of obituary writing and its various functions—gatekeeping, creation of collective memory, construction and exploitation of cultural proximity.

7 Zappa's own evaluation of rock journalism stands out in this section: "Most rock journalism, he once said, is people who can't write, interviewing people who can't talk, for people who can't read" (201). He, of course, was a master of all three, in an infinite variety of ways, each one opening new perspectives and possibilities. *Frank Zappa and the And*: there is indeed no end to exploring the complexities of Frank Zappa, whose work and persona stand their ground in the history of twentieth-century culture. Judging from this collection, the point is well taken.

INDEX

Subjects: Comptes rendus

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